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18 WOBURN BUILDINGS

SOME MEMORIES OF W. B. YEATS
BY
JOHN MASEFIELD.

THE CUALA PRESS
DUBLIN, IRELAND.
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SOME MEMORIES OF W. B. YEATS

His childhood, boyhood and young manhood were passed among painters, writers and clever talkers. His father, the painter, linked by temper and training to the protesting painting schools of France and England, was one of the wittiest talkers of his time. His sisters and brother all practised the arts. He, too, trained for a time as a painter, spoke always of painting as a painter speaks, and from time to time worked for his amusement with paints and pastels.

One of the main interests of his young manhood was chess.

From an early age he was deeply moved by the beauty and mystery of the Sligo coast. In his childhood, he had thought with joy that William Allingham had referred to the Sligo Rosses Point in the line

“From Slieve League to Rosses,”

and had been saddened to find that Allingham’s Rosses is the mountainy district in western Donegal.

It was ever much to him, as to his brother, that the beloved scene is mentioned in a seaman’s proverb:

“But for Ben Bulbin and Knocknarea
Many a poor seaman would be cast away.”

b

What manner of poetry was in the world
When he began? What are its images?
It is a twilit world of ancient forests,
Dark under crescent moon and evening star,
With waters, as of lake or a still sea,
Where swans, who are bewitched princesses, glide;
There the white unicorn prints dainty hoof,
And the white swans fly, crying mystery.

There, by the lake, the castle with the turrets
Stands, with one turret lighted to the night.

Within that tower room the pale princess,
Her waves of hair tossed down upon her shoulders,
Waits for the lover whom the witches hinder,
Their crooked noses hid in scarlet cloaks.
Yet, in the midnight, as the windvane creaks,
The watch-dog moans, the cat glares with green eyes,
Surely a turning key makes a lock grince,
Surely a footstep treads upon the stair
As someone gropes his way; the lover comes
To bring or find release.

Within that forest-hidden twilit castle
The lonely genius of the hour dwelt.
Art lived in intellects who could not share
The carelessness about them in the streets,

And therefore made themselves a solitude
Of unshared thought, wherein they built a shrine,
Rich with the gems and fragrant with the spice
And strange with the designs wrought for the god,
Who was but the hurt spirit's secret self.

He, with his knowledge of old tales and creeds,
His people's touching on the Greater Memory,
His daily and nightly dwelling in idea,
Made of his secret thought a chapel for us,
A shrine of art, so sweet with incense-smoke,
So dim with tapestries and painted glass,
So rapt with movement of the holy dancers
That wanderers felt the daimon stir the curtain.

Knowing the memory his people kept
Of heroes loved by gods and goddesses,
Loving the beauty of that memory,
And hating the disputes which poison life,
His wisdom urged his fellow-countrymen
To lay aside their rancour of dispute,
And remake an heroic Ireland
Where glorious people walk with the divine.

From this proceeded thirty years of toil
Leading a nation in the ways of thought,
Founding a theatre, making playwrights write,

And actors speak, and painters decorate;
Pouring sweet oil on many an angry wound,
Fighting misunderstanding, hatred, falsehood,
Encouraging, exhorting and expounding
From Bloomsbury to San Francisco Bay.

There was an English lady, whom I praise;
A painter, learned in astrology.
Closing my eyes, I see her as she was,
Upright, clear-minded, with a thin, fine face,
"The face," we said, "of some Egyptian priestess,
Wise in old knowledge and in honesty,"
The brave and generous Annie Horniman.

She built for him the Abbey Theatre,
A gateway to the world for many playwrights.
Himself, John Synge and Lady Gregory,
Beginners of a worthy company.
He was the moving spirit in that house.
He wrought its crown, those short, late, poignant plays.
You men, whose poems praise this theatre,
Its work, its players, its sincerity,
Praise also her, whose generous gift it was.

When in London, in the early years of this century,
he lived at 18, Woburn Buildings, at the back of St.
Pancras Church. The Buildings had the look of

having been built between 1810 and 1830. Forty years ago, that court of small houses was more romantic than it is today. At its western end in Upper Woburn Place, there were some interesting late Georgian houses behind plane-trees, all long since destroyed and their site covered by the new hotel. In the early years of this century, the shadows of the planes upon the houses were ever very beautiful in the lamplight. A blind beggar always stood there, under the lamp, after dark, offering matches and shoe-laces upon a little wooden tray.

Number 18 was on the left of Woburn Buildings, as you went from Woburn Place towards Kings Cross. He always described it as "next door to a lapidary's shop". On the wood at the right of the door near the bell-pull was a small brass plate, with the name Yeats deeply engraven on it. The screw-holes of the screws which held it could be seen there fairly lately. I hope that someone has kept the plate.

On entering the house, you went along the hall to the stair, which led inwards, then curved, and brought you to the landing on which he lived. On this, the second floor, he had a biggish front sitting-room and a small back kitchen. On the floor above, he had corresponding rooms, in which he slept.

His sitting-room was papered with brown paper; the window was hung with dark curtains; brown

baize at one time; later a dim blue.

On the wall to the right as you entered, there was, what?

Who can recollect what there was, forty years ago? Was there not a large painting of him, done by his father, some years before? Later, on that wall, there was the picture of *Memory Harbour*, painted by his brother. Were there not also bookcases on this wall? The window was over the front door; it looked out upon the court. On the wall to the left side of the window was there not a big black chalk or pencil drawing of him by his father, the original of the portrait reproduced as a frontispiece to the *Poems* (of 1899)?

The left side of the room had a fireplace in the centre. Over the mantelpiece hung a painting by his father illustrating a ballad by Blake, "I thought Love lived in the hot sunshine". There were also these things: Blake's first Dante engraving, *The Whirlwind of Lovers*; a little engraving of Blake's head; a print of Blake's *Ancient of Days*; and a little engraving from the *Job*. There were also two small pastels done by Yeats, of the Lake and hills near Coole; and a beautiful pencil drawing by Mr. Cecil French, of a woman holding a rose between her lips.

To the left of the fireplace, a tall dark settle jutted out into the room. At its back were bookshelves which

made as it were a screen to the door leading to the little kitchen. Behind this hung Beardsley's poster for the Florence Farr production of The Land of Heart's Desire.

To the right of the fireplace a small, dark divan ran along the wall to the outer wall of the house. Over this divan were a large photograph of a woman, and Blake's seventh Dante engraving, of Dante striking Bocca degli Abbatì's Head.

The table stood in the centre of the room during meals, and was then lifted to the side. At meal-times, it bore upon it a little curved metal gong or striker of an unusual oriental design (with some scarlet colour on it), which he struck to summon Mrs. Old. After meals, the table bore dark glasses, brown or green, and a dull red-clay tobacco-jar (with an oriental dragon embossed on it), containing cigarettes. The chairs were dark; the effect of the room was sombre. After 1904-5, he added to the room a big, dark blue lectern, on which his Kelmscott Chaucer stood, between enormous candles in big blue wooden sconces. These candles stood about four feet and were as thick as a ship's oar. The dim dark blue of this lectern was the most noticeable colour in the room. He added curtains to match it.

This sitting-room has been described in detail because it was the most interesting room in London. '

On Monday evenings, from eight until two or three in the morning, he was at home to his friends. It was the rule, that the last comer should always go down to let in the next comer. That curved stair, lit by a lamp at the curve, was trodden by all that made our world.

MY FIRST MEETING WITH HIM

I was to dine with him at seven o'clock in the evening of November the 5th, 1900.

It was a cold, windy night, with spottings of rain. I did not then know that part of London, and not many people were about in Upper Woburn Place to direct me. I had thought that the turn before me would be Woburn Buildings, but found that it was called Tavistock Place. Seeing a man striding towards me along Upper Woburn Place, I turned to him to ask where Woburn Buildings lay. He was a very tall big man, in the late thirties or early forties; he was pale, and had a fair moustache; he wore a silk hat and a long gray overcoat: he was probably a City man of some wealth; he was walking very swiftly and his mind was giving him no pleasure. I asked, if he could direct me to Woburn Buildings. Usually, an Englishman is beyond most people helpful and courteous when asked such a question. To my very great surprise, this man, without slackening his pace or

turning his head, cried, "I don't know where the hell it is, nor care," and passed on with a savage gesture of his hand and what Blake calls "all the fury of a spiritual existence."

I have often wondered since then what poison, loss, crisis, disaster or quarrel had brought him to that mood.

Almost at once, a burly middle-aged man drew near, of whom I remember these facts, that he was bearded, and spectacled, and that he wore an overcoat of blue woollen stuff known of old to me as "P-jacket-stuff". (He was not a sailor.) He told me, that Woburn Buildings was the next turn but one upon the right.

Mrs. Old opened the door to me and led the way upstairs. Yeats received me on the threshold of his sitting-room with the word, "Delighted."

We dined on a stewed steak and an apple-pie, cooked and served by Mrs. Old.

During the meal, we talked about the writers then most read by the young men in revolt against the times of their fathers. William Morris, the most gifted and the most practical of the rebels, was the main guide and leader here; we talked of his prose romances, of which Yeats preferred *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. But the chief literary influences then were French or Belgian, and the greatest of these

was Villiers de l'Isle Adam, whose *Axel* was our standard. Yeats praised his *La Révolte*.

We talked of the early plays of Maeterlinck, of which, at that time, he preferred *Les Aveugles*. He said, "Maeterlinck must be a godsend to the parodist:

First Princess

'Ygrono is going to give me a white swan.'

Second Princess

'I had a white swan, but it flew away.'

Third Princess

'I had two white swans, but they both died.'

Fourth Princess

'White swans always fly away or die.' "

Verlaine was then much read by the young men. Rimbaud had hardly come into his own; he was talked of only as a part of the Verlaine legend. Yeats spoke of his meeting with Verlaine in Paris, and of the woman who lived with him. "She was his cook; a woman of the people. Everybody said, 'What on earth can he find in her?' The important thing is that she was important to Verlaine."

He spoke of Verlaine as a dirty, amiable, gentle creature of exquisite sensibilities, who spoke with some pride of having been the victim of a love of Paris. "I am a moth of Paris . . . Paris have singed her moth."

He had taken down an English dictionary to shew Yeats in print the exact nature of the singeing. Speaking of Beardsley, Yeats said, "The thing that impressed me about Beardsley was the power of his mind. He might have been a great soldier or a great financier. The important thing about his art is, that in it he is always sitting in judgment upon himself." He was delighted, that I read and liked the poems of Ernest Dowson, who had died that February. "He was in love with a charming child, the daughter of two foreigners who kept a restaurant near Piccadilly Circus. He used to go there frequently in the evenings to play dominoes (some people say cards) with her. She was too young for marriage, but he hoped that at the end of three years he might be allowed to be engaged to her. However, at the end of the three years she married the waiter."

We talked of *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*, so bright with the talent of youth in protest. I thanked him for the intense pleasure his own work had given me.

Like most writers, he was interested only in the work he was doing at the moment. "One must get all the fruit one can from every mood," he said, "for the mood will soon pass and will never return."

After dinner, Lady Gregory called, to ask about his cold, and to say, that she hoped his throat would

be well for some speech which he was to make in London at the end of that week, (I think, to the Irish Literary Society).

Yeats said, that not many friends would look in upon him that evening, since so few knew that he was back from Ireland. Later in the evening, a young Irish poet came in with a journalist; then two Irish ladies came; no others. The talk ran upon the Irish poets, especially Lionel Johnson and George Russell (A.E.). Yeats talked with enthusiasm of Russell. "He has such an extraordinary influence upon the young men in Dublin."

The young Irish poet said, "Russell is a strict vegetarian but eats eggs. Somebody said, that a strict vegetarian ought not to eat eggs, since eggs may contain life. Russell said, that he ate only eggs from which the germ had been extracted."

The degree of blood-guilt in this must be left to casuists.

Lady Gregory, wishing to save Yeats' voice, read aloud some of the poems of Russell and Johnson, including Russell's *Janus* and Johnson's *Te Martyrum Candidatus*. As always, she read very clearly and agreeably, with a just emphasis and a good sense of rhythm. When she had finished, Yeats took a book, saying that there was a magnificent poem in it, which he wanted to read. He then read aloud Dora

Sigerson's poem, *Cean Duv Deelish* (*Dear Black Head*).

His reading was unlike that of any other man. He stressed the rhythm till it almost became a chant; he went with speed, marking every beat and dwelling on his vowels. That wavering ecstatic song, then heard by me for the first time, was to remain with me for years.

We all came away early, because of his cold. As we parted, he asked me to come in the next Monday after dinner, if I were free.

Some years after this, at another of the Monday evenings, Lady Gregory said to me, "I was the first friend you had here. On that first Monday, he wanted to send you a telegram, telling you not to come, because of his cold. I told him he had better see you; but he said, 'I think I'll put him off.' However, he could not do this, because he had lost your address."

There was a kind of blackguard beauty about Woburn Buildings at night, forty years ago. The houses had come down in the world, and as it were gone on the streets. They seemed to screen discreet vice and secret crime. The court was quiet enough, behind drawn blinds and curtains; but in a street at the eastern end there were nightly rows and singings, and the children seemed never to go to bed.

Yeats was known there as "the toff what lives in the Buildings". He was said to be the only man in the street who ever received letters.

He felt the charm of the mystery and vitality of the district, but said that it was incomplete, it had no pawn-shop. He said that the modern poet would remake Dr. Johnson's famous line to,
"Toil, envy, want, the Pawn-shop and the jail."

OF MRS. OLD

I think that I am right in saying that her husband was a carpenter and that they were Yeats' landlords during his stay at Woburn Buildings. She was a tall, robust country-woman from somewhere a little to the east of Oxford. When I last saw her, twelve years ago, she was living in Kent. She said, "I shall never forget the blessed days with Mr. Yeats at Woburn Buildings, for, oh, they were blessed days."
She summed up wisely; none of those who knew them will forget them, nor think them other than most blessed.

ON HIS TOBACCO JAR

This is the dull red jar of earthenware
Which held Virginian cigarettes on Mondays;
The embossed decoration of black dragons
Is now much worn away; the side is pitted;

The knobbed lid has been cracked and rivetted;
Thirty years past I bargained with him for it.
What hands have dipped for cigarettes within you;
What Monday companies have looked upon you:
The writers and the painters and the speakers,
The occultists, the visionary women,
Astrologers with Saturn on their moons,
And contemplative men who lived on herbs
And uttered gentleness and sanctity,
The poets of the half-a-dozen schools,
Young men in cloaks, velvet, or evening dress;
Publishers, publicists and journalists,
Parliament men, who served the Irish cause,
And every Irish writer, painter and thinker.

This dull red earthen jar was on his table
When Lady Gregory took up the script
And read Synge's earliest plays to the small group.
It stood amidst our pleasure and Synge's pride.
It stood among the first experiments
Of speaking poetry to notes of music,
When Florence Farr, who died a Buddhist nun,
Took up the psaltery which Dolmetsch made
And spoke Ulysses taking up the bow
Or sang about the lover and his lass.
What wisdom, merriment and various beauty
Have played about this clay, and what gay scenes.

Blithe Pixie, singing Yeats's songs or telling
West Indian tales with her bright painted dolls.
And that kind visionary man who saw
The long-past lives of each of us in turn
And always rightly taking from each one
Some constant thought, image, recurring dream,
Which was, he said, the lingering memory
Kept by the self of its passed pilgrimage.

Outside, the shadows of the plane-trees danced
Amid the lamplight; the blind beggar shifted
From foot to foot; the little children screamed
At the road junction at the Buildings' end;
And night-men seeking after drinks and drabs
Moved towards pots and shawls under the lamps.
Yet in that upper room round the red jar
Each one of us was touched to a romance
Believing in that image of the past.
There was a strangeness and a poetry
About that place; the blind man by the lamp
By day, was a tea-taster in the City.
Within the gloomy churchyard at our backs
Godwin and Mary Woolstonecraft had lain.
There, the young Thomas Hardy years before
Had helped to lift a coffin which broke open
Displaying a man's bones and two men's skulls.

There one among us told how he had gone
To see a visionary Russian woman,
Within whose presence exquisite bright flowers
Fell from the ceiling ; he had gathered these
And borne them home, and all who met him saw
And praised their beauty and their scent ; alas
No trace remained of them when morning came.

Perhaps no-one of us within the room
But felt that any beauty might begin
At any moment there, that some red cock
Would perch upon the settle and cry Morning,
That then the ceiling and the walls would fade
And blue anemones be at our feet,
And horses with red ears come whinnying fast,
To bear us thence, to islands of desire
Where the never-dying Phoenix sings in fire,
Where the givers, and the wise ones and the wonders
Dispense their shining bread amid their peace.

COOLE

Somewhere in his sitting-room, perhaps to the left
of the fire, was a painting by him, of the library at
Coole, as seen from the open door. Was there not also
somewhere in his room a painting of the front of the
house at Coole done either by himself or by Robert
Gregory ?

Near Coole, a strange river runs, disappears, reappears, forms a lake or chain of lakes, then disappears again, but may be heard talking underground, or even seen, at the bottom of occasional deep shafts and pot-holes. The woods in which these waters go are strange and uncanny. In the distance, are low, strange, rocky, beautiful hills. He told me that one of these hills was Slieve Echtge, mentioned in an ancient Irish poem:

“The stag upon Slieve Echtge hears the howling of the wolves.”

This was the “Echtge of streams” in his own most beautiful poem.

In the opposite direction was a higher hill, on the shoulder of which was a vast cairn of stones, raised over the body of Conan, “bald Conan” with the “slandrous tongue”. He said that men had opened the cairn and had come upon “old Irish writing” which said simply, with profound effect,

“Conan, the swift-footed, the bare-footed.”

I walked out with him one night in the full harvest-moon at Coole. Not far from the house, we came upon an old man under an old thorn-tree. He came

towards us, as Yeats said, "not knowing quite whether we were spirits or mortals, but glad to greet us whichever we were."

In the afternoons, I used to row him out onto the lake to fish (for perch and pike). When I first went there, in the beauty of September, the lake was full. Under the burning sky, in the still shadows, the rocks of the lake had the greyness and strangeness of mirage. As we drifted into the lower lake, nine white swans rose up and clanked away from us. "I have always thought," Yeats said, "that this is the most beautiful place in the world."

The next day, without apparent reason, the lake was almost empty of water. Great fissures in the rock shewed where it had gone.

He had told me of the beautiful, ill-fated girl known as the Rose of Ballylee. We went to Ballylee, to see where she had lived. One or two old people living there still remembered her. The Coole River in its gush flows through Ballylee and turns a mill there. The miller led us down stream a little and shewed us the double square of stones in the grass which marked the foundations of the Rose's Cabin. Within those ruins, an exquisite creature had once lived; the old women still wept when they talked of her.

Just beyond the ruins, the river went underground. "Two French scientists went down there," Yeats

said, "and explored the river's course. They said, that the Caves of Kentucky are nothing to the caves here."

At Coole, one felt, that nothing had ever died there; all was near by, the ancient gods, the fairies, the heroes, the hawthorn of all the Springs, the swans of all the waters, and the Rose of Ballylee, the beautiful. At night, the moonlight and the woods seemed full of an intensely living past.

FINN AND THE CHESS-MEN

Now that he is gone into his quiet,
I remember Finn and the Fianna
Called from Tara by the woes of Eire
Into fifty weary years of warring,
Then in old age coming back to Tara.

Tara of the Riders of King Cormac,
Stood about an ever-fruiting apple
Growing from a pool of living water.
There the young Fianna speared the stags,
Stabbed the wild-bulls midst the river-flags,
Knifed the she-wolf cubbing in the crags;
While the heroes of King Cormac's council
Stood about the chess-board in the garden.

Vast the chess-board as a field for hurley,
White with the sea-shells and red with iron;
Great the chess-men, wrought of gold and silver.
Subtle were the policies they laid
Playing in the chess-games with the King.
War, attacking and defence, they played,
Ends they planned to which the means obeyed,
Wintry games that ended with a spring;
There they lingered, pondering the moves.

There their minds, with all their hates and loves,
Narrowed to the white-hot point of burning.
They debated whether thought's extreme
Might so work upon the chess-board pieces
That the player's will would make them move
Of themselves upon the coloured chequers.

"Yes," said Finn, "there is not any limit
To the powers of excited thinking.
I maintain that the ideas of wisdom
Burn forever in eternal fires
Beautiful forever in wide Heaven.
Man in his intensity of brooding
Touches on this Wisdom's flaming fringes,
He is lifted into life eternal,
The fruition of his moment is eternal.
I maintain that if man make an image,
Say of clay or wax, or like these chess-men,

Then, by intense thought, he can inform it,
Till it rise and move and do his bidding,
Be his manhood in creating beauty,
Be his messenger in telling truth.

"Let us try to fill these chiselled pieces
With the life our utmost thinking reaches
That they live and move and do the fineness.
Seen when mortal touches at divineness."
Therefore the Fianna brooded gladly
Pondering deep thought about the chess-board.

After many days, as they were gathered
There by Finn in thought above the chess-play,
Suddenly the silver knight plucked bridle,
Turned his horse, and tossed his lance and cried
Uncouth speech to Finn, "Where shall I ride?
What am I to murder with my spear?"

All of the Fianna standing near
Drew deep breath and muttered, "Finn has done it.
He has given living to the Rider."
Finn said, "It is nothing; it is useless."
Down the lance dropped from the silver rider,
Heavily the horse regained his station.
Finn said, "That was blood-life, dog-life, wolf-life.
Nothing to the purpose; try again."

All their days of thinking were in vain;
Living did not quicken in the chess-men.
Till at last a golden Council-piece
Turned with weary gesture of denial
Muttering obscure words of half-meaning,
From the chess-play to the chess-board edge.
Finn said, "This is shadow-life; surrender;
Nothing to the purpose; try again."

There they thought, till, on an April morning
One came crying, "Leave this chess, Fianna.
Call your men, King Cormac; hurry; hurry.
All the Connaught bays are full of devils.
Ships of devils land there, scattering hell.
They are burning, they are reiving, they are raping.
All the sacred places are defiled,
They are killing woman, man and child.
Hurry, you Fianna, with your spears,
Kill these scatterers of blood and tears,
Harry them to Hell, where they belong."
Finn said, "Fighting devils will take long.
Devils out of Hell have devils' strength.
Men by God's help vanquish them at length.
But for years we shall not as I guess
Stand about this chess-board, playing chess
Searching thoughts within whose implication
Run the link and law of all creation.

We had nearly reached the point of power
When our wills with intellectual dower
Might have sent these chess-men in our stead,
Blessing man and smiting devils dead.
Now the secrets spirits understand
Have to wait till we have done with hand.
Leave the playing ; let the chess-men bide.
Give this man a horse and let him guide.
Blow your war-horn, Cormac, let us ride."

Then, for fifty years, Finn fought the devils ;
Beat them from their takings, sank their galleys
Broke their armies, stormed their palisadings,
Drove them up the glens into the mountains,
Thence into the rocks upon the headlands
Where the sand pelts on the starving sand-grass
There, at the long last, they broke the devils,
Spilled the last wolf-spirit on the Kaedhu,
Knew the fifty years of warring over.

Then they heaped the cairns above their comrades
And returned, a dwindled troop, to Tara.

Desolate was all that place of heroes.
Fallen were the roof trees of the palace,
Stags had trodden-in the fish-pool margins,
Bramble-sprays had barred the hazel-alley,

Round the spring of life a marsh of muckweed
Quelled the apple to a lichened ruin
Bearing only one live sprig of greenness.
Green upon the chess-board of the heroes
Grew the summer grass in her abundance,
White with the moon-daisies of June's joy
Golden with the butter-cup and pink,
Pink from tangled heads of ragged-robin,
So that all who looked upon it wondered
Is this meadow green with summer-grasses,
Pink from ragged-robin, or is it white,
Or is it golden, this the summer-wonder?
Finn, who stood to marvel at the beauty,
Cried, "Beneath the tangle of these flowers
See, our chess-men, lying as we left them.
Tara of the Kings shall be rebuilt,
All the marvel of our game and art
Beat again from the eternal heart,
These the golden and the silver things
Thought shall quicken them and give them wings,
They shall fly about the world and bless
Even Man the Mad with happiness."

Thus it was in Tara of the Kings
Where the apple grows above the springs.
There they rebuilt Tara for King Cormac,
There their quick imaginations wrought

Life out of the ecstasies of thought
Till the wonder happened, all unlike
Aught that they had dreamed of; shapes of brightness
Swept out of the air and caught them skyward
In a swiftness and a shining and a singing,
Energy undying, light unfading,
Ecstasy eternal, beauty deathless.

Then the summer-grass again was green
Where the playing at the chess had been.

Was not this one such an one as Finn
Living at a Tara of the spirit,
Pondering the problems of the chess-play,
Till the tidings came of devils landed
Bringing ruin to the mind of Eire.

Did he not lay by his golden chess-men,
Gallop into Eire in his fury
With his swiftness and his valour and his wisdom,
Hallooing the young men at the devils
To destroy them and to stablish something finer
By a weary half a century of warfare?

'Then, the warfare done, the beauty stablished,
Has he not cast down his battle-harness,
Turned his fire-footed horse to ocean,

Mounted, and upon the running waters
Ridden to that Tara of the spirit,
There to take again the golden chess-men?

Thus it seems to him who tells the story.

ON WHAT HE WAS

He was of splendid presence, tall, well-made,
With noble, upright carriage and great head
Under a shock of black hair, worn so long
He had a trick of tossing back his head
As though to shake the hair back from his eyes.
His face was pale; his eyes peered from deep settings
Through pince-nez glasses; he had faulty sight.

Once, in his Sligo days, he shewed his eyes
To some old herbalist and hedge-doctor,
Who cured the country-folk.

The old man pondered,
Again looked at the eyes and gave advice:
“Go pick blue violets in the dew of the morning
And boil them in new milk, and bathe your eyes.”
(Charming prescription; useless, as it proved.)

His hands were the most lovely of his time;
His greeting, of the right hand gravely lifted,
Half, benediction, half, old courtesy,
Was such as Hector might have given in Troy,

Or Job, in Uz, to some Egyptian Prince
Going on ambassage to Babylon.
These hands were portions of his eloquence,
Quick with his wit, grave with his reverie.

His eloquence, in public speech, was grave,
Witty in illustration, wise in counsel,
"Too reasoned," some have said, "for Irish hearers,"
Perhaps too full of gesture for the English,
Though the English listened gladly, and with praise.
In private speech, he was without any peer,
For sudden, complete insight and swift judgement,
For merry wit, game banter, lasting truth.
His Irish voice would quicken with excitement
As he leaned forward, chuckling at his point.

Rags of remembrance once may have flown in a banner,
These are some scraps from his talk.

"I always think that a banana tastes
Just as a tallow-candle will in Paradise."

"Well . . . the poor woman is a china egg
On whom I've sat for years."

"A prophet's an unreasonable being
Raised up by Providence, when Providence
Is going to be most unreasonable."

A high romance for this great poet dead,
Light footfalls with the beauty of white flowers,
And grace like delicate thought.

Some of these verses were spoken in his memory on the afternoon and evening of Friday, July the 28th, 1939, being the last day of the Oxford Summer Diversions, a Festival of plays and poetry founded in 1937 as one little part of the influence scattered by him.

Here ends Some Memories of W. B. Yeats
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